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New Year's resolutions for a greener 2010

By Candace Page, Free Press Staff Writer

It's easy to laugh at the tradition of New Year's resolutions and the frequent, speedy dissipation of the resolvers' resolve.

I don't join that laughter.

Fresh vows to eat less, exercise more, spend more time with our kids, clean the basement — what heartening evidence of the essential optimism of the human psyche, of our willingness to recognize our weaknesses and try (again and again and again) to overcome them.

With this in mind, Green Mountain asked a dozen knowledgeable Vermonters for their "green resolutions" for 2010.

We weren't looking for ways to turn lives upside-down in the name of living more lightly on the Earth.

We hoped for incremental approaches to better understand and enjoy the natural world; to use less energy; eat more local food; and make our voices heard in green policy debates.

Our contributors delivered. Inside, you'll find some challenging ideas, including waste expert Tom Moreau's pledge to think twice before he makes purchases that generate packaging waste.

You'll also find plenty of simple ideas. In a couple of minutes next spring, for example, you could drop some sticks in your home's window wells. That, says scientist Jim Andrews, will give small mammals and snakes an escape route if they fall in.

Vegetable grower Rachel Nevitt has half a dozen suggestions, from asking your restaurant server which foods on the menu are grown locally to this: "Smile at a farmer." I've adopted that one already: Farmers' work is hard, the growing season short, the financial rewards small. Smiling is the least we can do.

POLITICS: Make your voice heard

• **Be a squeaky wheel: Speak up when no recycling bins are available at events or businesses. Write letters to the editor about environmental issues you care about. Remember that one phone call or e-mail to your legislator can have a huge impact.**

—Clare Innes, Williston, marketing manager, Chittenden Solid Waste District

Jim Andrews, Salisbury, herpetologist:

- Speak to others about the impact of population growth on habitat consumption.
- Buy a Vermont Conservation license plate.

James Ehlers, Colchester, director, Lake Champlain International:

- Buy a fishing license even if you do not fish — it's the best tool for funding conservation and lake access.
- Go to a selectboard meeting and express your interest in ensuring town culverts allow fish to pass through.
- Join a fisheries conservation organization or a watershed association or both.

James Moore, clean energy advocate, Vermont Public Interest Research Group. Personal resolutions:

- Every week I will push my elected leaders to lead.
- I will direct all of my charitable giving to giving us a fighting chance at stopping global warming.

HOME: Little changes, big difference

• **One of the best things you can do in 2010 is to involve the whole family in energy efficiency, making it fun by**

asking your kids to be energy detectives.

It's one thing when you learn about the importance of caulking drafty windows and weatherstripping doors to seal air leaks, but quite another when your kids strongly urge you to do so.

My house is a great example. We live in Burlington, where the first 100 kilowatt hours used during the month are the least expensive. So, to get those low rates, we purchased a whole house energy monitor to find out when — and why — our energy use spiked.

It's amazing how much energy you use when you run the dryer and the microwave at the same time. When kids look at the monitor, and then see that you left the lights on upstairs, they let you know right away!

— *Li Ling Young*

Clare Innes:

- Start a compost pile, or drop kitchen scraps off where they will be composted or fed to nearby farm animals.
- Kick products containing toxic chemicals out of the kitchen (and therefore out of the environment, once they go down the drain) and use only green products.

Bridget Butler:

- Take advantage of the government. There are federal tax credits available to improve the energy efficiency in your home. The 1950s house we bought this year needs new windows and the tax credit will pay for up to 30 percent of their cost.

Tom Moreau:

- I will think more about environmental impact before each purchase I make. Can the packaging material be reused or recycled? What will be the product's "end of life?" Will the product be durable so that it lasts? Is the product or its packaging made from either recyclable or sustainable materials? This "think as you buy" mentality will lead to better systems in the future, including product stewardship and a more complete infrastructure converting waste to worth.

Chris Burns:

- Consistently set back the temperature at home when you are away for most of the day.
- Install a programmable thermostat to allow automatic temperature adjustments. Savings can amount to 5 percent to 20 percent of yearly heating costs.
- Have gas or oil heating equipment professionally inspected this year.
- Turn off entertainment and computer equipment when not in use to reduce phantom load. Power strips with on-off buttons work great for this.
- Replace any incandescent light bulb that is on for more than two hours a day with a compact fluorescent energy-saving bulb. Rebates are available.

FOOD: Find tasty new ways to eat, source food

- **Commit to trying a local food, just because it's local. The stewed spinach from a can that your mom made you eat is not the same as spinach picked fresh from the field.**

— *Rachel Nevitt*

Mary Sullivan:

- We will reduce our food miles by adding an extra row to our backyard garden in the spring, raising more of our own food on our own little plot.
- I will visit the farmers market every Saturday I am home to increase the amount of locally grown food we eat.

Karen Alence:

- My New Year's resolution is to make creative, enticing, delicious vegetarian meals for my family in order to completely wean them off meat products. Raising animals for food is a primary cause of land degradation, air pollution, water shortages, water pollution, loss of biodiversity and not least of all, global warming. Producing a calorie of meat protein means burning more than 10 times as much fossil fuel — and spewing more than 10 times as much heat-trapping carbon dioxide — as does a calorie of plant protein.

Helen Labun Jordan:

- Keep local food basics always on hand: Many an "eat local" resolution has fallen apart because of time constraints. A little work at the start of the week — homemade soup stock, precooked local beans, cooked wheatberries, refrigerated dough for pizza — can make it easy to throw together a local meal on a busy weeknight.
- Attend a harvest dinner, a farm open house, a cooking class or a farmers market. A big part of seeking out locally grown food is the opportunity for socializing and community.
- Master the art of the stir fry. A stir fry is a quick way to use local foods for vegetarians or meat eaters, and a variety of

saucers add diversity. But I'm too impatient to learn the correct techniques and end up with a half steamed, half sauteed imitation that gets topped with a dash of soy sauce. This year, I'm mastering the stir fry.

Rachel Nevitt:

- Resolve to read and understand labels and the list of ingredients. GMO-free? Naturally-raised? Organic? What are you eating?
- Ask your server which foods on the menu are bought from local farms. The more we ask, the more they'll know what we want.
- Ask a produce manager at your grocery store what percentage of the food price goes to the farmer. Support stores that support farmers.
- Figure out one thing you buy occasionally that you really don't need, and put those dollars toward a healthy, local food you normally don't buy because it's too expensive.
- Smile at a farmer.

NATURE: Help critters, handle snakes, and explore the natural world

• **Photograph one snake or turtle and report it to the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas.**

Taking a photo focuses your attention on your subject. It often requires that you learn something about the habitat and habits of the subject. With an awareness of the species around us, we can assign value to them and act to protect them. Without it, we will not.

A photograph serves as a permanent voucher and clears up any questions of an incorrect identification. If anyone ever questions a given report — particularly of a rare or hard-to-identify species — a good, clear photo settles the issue. You don't need to be sure what you are looking at. If you can take a clear photo, we can tell you what it was.

I had one older man who provided lots of reports, most of them identified incorrectly. It did not matter, because he took excellent photographs, and we could just correct the species.

— *Jim Andrews*

• **Embrace your inner geek: Become a citizen scientist.**

I'm going beyond the Christmas Bird Count. I'm hoping to help collect water samples this year for the state from my kayak. There aren't enough scientists out there to gather all the data we need to make informed choices about conservation. Vernal-pool mapping, water sampling and invasive-species-monitoring projects require minimal training and offer you a great excuse to spend the day outside.

— *Bridget Butler*

Jim Andrews:

- Put sticks in your window wells so that reptiles, amphibians and small mammals can get out.
- Teach your kids not to be afraid of our harmless snakes. Handle a snake for the first time, and show your kids.
- Take your kids out on a rainy spring night to see amphibians migrate. Help at least one turtle or snake safely across the road.

James Ehlers:

- Take a youngster fishing, and share the wonder of the natural world.
- Return any fish you catch to the water if you do not plan to eat it.
- Thoroughly rinse your boat, trailer and all equipment before going to a new body of water to help prevent the spread of invasive species.
- Sit in a duck blind with an experienced duck hunter as he or she identifies all the different species of waterfowl moving through the marsh.

Jim Shallow:

- Learn four bird songs, and then go out and hear them live. Start today by buying a CD of bird songs, or visit the new interactive Audubon guides online (<http://audubonguides.com/home.html>), where you can download an app for your iPhone or iPod touch. Join a local bird walk in May or June to listen to your birds live in concert. Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring" when she noticed fewer birds singing each spring. This audible clue changed the way the world viewed our relationship

with nature.

Who knows how your new found knowledge will change you and the world we live in?

Contact Candy Page at 660-1865 or cpage@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com

Additional Facts

The contributors

- **Karen Alence** is a member of the South Burlington Energy Committee and helped to start a low-carbon-diet group in her neighborhood.
 - **Jim Andrews** is a herpetologist in Salisbury and author of the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas, www.community.middlebury.edu/~herpatlas.
 - **Bridget Butler** is a birder and manages the Voices for the Lake project at the ECHO Lake Aquarium.
 - **James Ehlers** of Colchester is executive director of Lake Champlain International Inc., a nonprofit group that sponsors a major fishing derby.
 - **Clare Innes** of Williston is the marketing manager at the Chittenden Solid Waste District.
 - **Helen Labun Jordan** of East Montpelier is the food-policy administrator at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture.
 - **James Moore**, clean energy advocate, Vermont Public Interest Research Group.
 - **Tom Moreau** of Burlington is general manager of the Chittenden Solid Waste District.
 - **Rachel Nevitt** of Burlington operates Full Moon Farm in Hinesburg with her husband, David Zuckerman.
 - **Chris Ray** of Burlington is director of energy services at the Burlington Electric Department.
 - **Jim Shallow** is conservation and policy director at Audubon Vermont.
 - **Mary Sullivan** of Burlington is communications coordinator at Burlington Electric Department.
 - **Li Ling Young** of Burlington is part of the "Home Team" of residential energy experts at Efficiency Vermont.
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